

**AN EXPLORATION OF TONGAN THEOLOGICAL MODELS & PRACTICES THAT
CAN GUIDE THE PROVISION OF SPIRITUAL CARE FOR THE YOUNG ADULTS
OF THE FIRST TONGAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF POMONA,
CALIFORNIA**

**A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty
Claremont School of Theology**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry**

**By
Siaosi Prescott
May, 2018**

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This professional project completed by

SIAOSI PRESCOTT

has been presented to and accepted by the
Faculty of Claremont School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Faculty Committee

Lincoln E. Galloway, Chairperson

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ABSTRACT

An Exploration of Tongan Theological Models and Practices that can guide the provision of Spiritual Care for the Young Adults of the First Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona, California.

by

Siaosi Prescott

This research project will present the findings from the Tongan American Young Adults of the First Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona Valley, Pomona, California, of the issues and perhaps problems that keep them away from attending church and participating in the Tongan worship services as well as church activities. Recommendations from the project will be shared so church leaders can provide spiritual care for these youths.

Throughout this paper, when I refer to the Tongan American young adults, this means those in the 18-40 years of age, this is target group for this project. I will also discuss what is happening in the SiasiUesilianaTau'ataina 'o Tonga (SUTT) traditional worshipping services and activities in Tonga for the purpose of drawing a comparison between Tonga and the Diaspora Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona.

There is a distinct lack of interest displayed by our young adults, especially those from the ages of 18-40, in regards to attending church throughout the year. Why is this happening to our young adults? This paper will provide some answers to the problem and also recommend ways to help understand and increase the target group's participation and involvement in church and its activities.

The results may help or give information and understanding to others in the future that will be interested in conducting further research in this field. This paper will contribute to conversations and discussions in the area of youth ministry in Tongan and other cultural contexts.

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I most humbly give thanks to the good Lord Almighty whose Spirit has blessed me with the opportunity to finally achieve this life-long goal of being able to complete a higher level of education. I give all the glory and honor to the Highest of the high.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research project to my parents Viliami and ‘Ana Prescott for bringing me into this world, pushing me through my early schooling at GPS ‘Atele from where I continued on to Tupou College and finished at Tupou High School; continued to further my education at Alaska Bible College, Alaska to Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley and finish here at Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, where I laid the firm foundation of all the areas in my life, physically, emotionally and spiritually and instilled in me the idea not only to go into ministry but to take the pastoral role; to my wife LusianaNasipau’u Prescott and our four children, William, Niulolo, Malakai, and LeoNia Prescott; to my grandkids, Nanasipau’u, Viliami, ‘Anamanu, Joselyn, Lilimei, Siaosi, and Niulolo Prescott for hanging in there with me during the tough and difficult times.

I would also like to dedicate this to everyone at the First Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona Valley, Pomona, California. Lastly and most importantly, I dedicate this to the Almighty God for his intervention and guidance throughout this whole project; without the Holy Spirit I would not be able to accomplish this challenging work.

I would like to dedicate my favorite Tongan Bible verse and hymn that held me together throughout every day during my study here.

VeesiFolofola (Bible verse):

“He‘okuou ‘ilope ‘ae ngaahifakakaukau
‘okuoufakakaukaukiatekimoutolukoSihovaiaimei he
Ta’ehamaikoengaahifakakaukaulelei, ‘o ‘ikaisiokovi, ke ‘angekiatekimoutolu ha
‘amuimo ha ‘amanaki.”(Selemaia 29:11, TohitapuKatoa, Jeremiah 19:11, NASB).

This is passage reminds me of God’s loving. God knows the struggles we have as individuals, families, churches and communities as described in this project. However, God

always has a plan for us that is meant not to harm us but to prosper us and give us hope and a future.

Himi 610 (Tongan Hymn) veesi ‘uluaki.

“Oikeutalahokumonuu
Kuotema’u ‘ae fanau’ifo’ou
Hoko ‘ae maamakihepo’uli
Hiki ‘ae mate kihemo’ui
Hokumonuu e ‘ekukoloa
‘Ete ‘ongo’i he taimikotoa
Fakamo’onifakapapau
Fale ‘ae ‘Eiki ‘iate au.” (Koetohihimi ‘ae SiasiUesilianaTau’ataina ‘o Tonga)

This Tongan hymn expresses the gratitude of someone who was lost and is now found and welcomed home by Christ. God has accepted me, forgiven me, and given me life once again. I am blessed everyday and thankful that God is with me always.

I. INTRODUCTION

i. Problem Addressed by the Project

The problem addressed by this project is the absence of Tongan American young adults from the worship services and other activities of the Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona Valley in Pomona, California. The project aims at exploring their gifts, spiritual needs, views and their expectations of the church, and how their views could help in addressing the problem of their absence.

ii. Importance of the Problem

The importance or the big picture of this project is to save and maintain the Tongan-American United Methodist Churches to continue ministry that will lead people to Christ for the future in the United States. This aligns well with the mission statement of the United Methodist Church in the Book of Discipline stating that “The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”¹

I am an ordained elder in the Rocky Mountain Conference (RMC). As a Pastor in the United Methodist Church, I have been appointed to serve in a lot of small Caucasian churches in the rural areas of Colorado. I have come to realize the importance of continuing the life of

¹“The Ministry of all Christians,” *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), paragraph 120.

churches into the future and its dependence on young adults and youths within the church. There were always just a few young adults in the churches that I served. Within those churches, I

witnessed the emptiness and lack of young adults attending the church services as well as other church related activities. This could be one of the reasons for declining membership in many of the UMC churches, with some churches being forced to close their doors for good. One of the studies related to my project was that of a Tongan pastor of the UMC Tevita F. Vaikona. In his doctoral project a year ago titled *Restoring Interest and Participation of Young Adult Tongans in the First United Methodist Church of San Bruno, California*, Vaikona explains “My position for this local church started to open my eyes as to one of the main realities of most church concerns: young people were notably absent! Only five young people attended this local church where I was called to be a Youth Pastor.”² This indicates a growing concern about the future of the ministry in this church as well as others of similar characteristics.

The reality of the situation with the lack of youths in church was that many young adults left home to attend school elsewhere and either stayed or moved to new places to live. Some did not return to the place they called home; some got married and build a new family somewhere else. The young adults had many other reasons for not coming back home and into their home churches. For those that came home, they did not attend church for individual reasons such as having a busy work schedule, being too tired and needing time off with friends and family and so on. Only a few attended church.

Looking at situations like these, which may be common to some of the churches, it is very important to identify the reasons for absence of youths in church and in particular, exploring

²Tevita F. Vaikona, “Restoring Interest and participation of Young Adults Tongan in the First United Methodist church of San Bruno” (DMin Project, Drew University, 2016), 6.

the issues that the Tongan American young adults have, and how Tongan churches and congregations will thrive and continue its ministry in the future.

As I reflect upon my experiences while serving in those churches, I realized that this is a common issue that existed in many Caucasian-managed churches too; the lack of young adults is visible and can be seen in many churches. When I took leave of absence from my pastoral role in the Rocky Mountain Conference (RMC) to study a Doctor of Ministry program at Claremont School of Theology, my wife and I attended the First Tongan Methodist Church in Pomona Valley, Pomona, California as our home church. The first day we went to a Sunday service, I recognized the empty pews and a distinct lack of young adults in the Sunday service or in any other church activities. I thought that perhaps it only happened once in a while, but the following Sunday, the same thing happened. Noticing this pattern, I came to understand that this was not only a problem in rural or Caucasian churches but also in Tongan churches too.

Since that first day we attended our new home church, I wanted to work on addressing the issues relating to Tongan young adults not attending and participating in church services and activities. Hence this project is timely; I want to do as much as I can to learn new ideas and methods to help bring the youths back to my home church and it may help other Tongan American churches too. One of the most important things is to have an open mind about developing ideas and implementing ways that have worked elsewhere in bringing youths back to church. Even to the point of changing some of the current practices because it's always being done that way in the First Tongan UMC of Pomona Valley, and more importantly, in all other United Methodist Tongan churches.

This research project is very important to all the Tongan clergy and Tongan UMC churches as a whole. It will also be important to the UMC Conferences where Tongan clergy

serve not only in a Tongan congregation but also in a cross- cultural appointment. Even though nowadays these issues occur in every denomination and other churches, this research project will focus only on the Tongan-American young adults in Pomona Valley.

I hope that the findings in this research will help church leaders and congregations to work together for the common good of the whole body of Christ including the young adults at our churches. Caution should be noted though, that the findings are limited only to this cohort of youths, and hence cannot be generalized or applied to all similar churches.

iii. Work Previously Done in the Field

There have been some work and research conducted on this subject by scholars from different cultures and traditions, however, it is a relatively new topic within the Tongan community and as such there is hardly any documented information specific to Tongan churches addressing this problem. There has been related work in ethno-specific congregations, and I would like to contribute my research to building the literary and theological work in this area.

A Tongan pastor of the Tongan-American Free Wesleyan Church (TAFWC), Viliami A. Vakalahi, in his doctoral project *Tongan – American Free Wesleyan Church (TAFWC), Siasi Uesiliana Tau’ataina Tonga-Amelika (SUTTA): Becoming Vital U.S. Church in 2012* acknowledged the importance of this issue/s in the Tongan church by saying that “there are cultural and generational differences that contribute to the problem. For example, some people think that a program will start whenever they are ready, which is problematic for the Tongan-American in the United States which is a busier environment that is not as laid back as the

environment of the Island.”³ He was pointing out one of the issues that is faced today by the Tongan churches in America is adjusting to the pressure of living in a western country, which may also be more individualistic in their outlook as compared to the collectivist Tongan society, that they are used to in Tonga.

As mentioned earlier, Pastor Tevita F. Vaikona of the First Tongan United Methodist church of San Bruno in his DMin project, 2017 *Restoring Interest and Participation of Young Adult Tongans in the First UMC of San Bruno* talks about one of the realities of his own church and that is ‘that young people were notably absent’. He notices only five young people attended his local church, and “he was employed as a Youth Pastor.”⁴ Pastor Vaikona notices that the youth attendance was always low and that a new approach or practice is very much needed in the church.

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook in her book, *Pilgrimage- The Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart* writes that the “sacred art pilgrimage is deeply inscribed in the human heart. For many, going ‘on pilgrimage’ will mean physical travel.”⁵ She stresses the importance of understanding the word “pilgrimage” which means a stranger or foreigner and the adjustments that they have to make to live in a foreign land. Applying this to the Tongan immigrants to the United States, they could be classified as pilgrims, strangers and foreigners in this new land. In process of adjusting to their new environment, they have faced many challenges on many fronts; these could be personal, cultural, socio-economic or others. How they transform their culture to

³Sione A. Vakalahi, *Tongan-American Free Wesleyan Church (TAFWC), Siasi Uesiliana Tau’ataina Tonga-Amelika (SUTTA): Becoming Vital U.S. Church in 2012* (DMin Project, Claremont School of Theology, 2012), 1.

⁴Tevita F. Vaikona, 6.

⁵Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-The Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Path Publishing, 2013), 3.

suit their newly formed communities is interesting to note, because the transformative processes have an impact on how church and its practices are operationalized in a foreign land such as the USA. Each and every one of the Tongan immigrants including young Tongan-American adults can be considered pilgrims, and they will remain so, until a time when they could build a community, which always includes a church as a home base for all pilgrims, even with the absence of youths.

Pastor Sione T.T. Tu'ipulotu of the UMC of United with Hope in the Cal-Pac conference shared in his DMin project, 2013 *Gospel of Hope for the World of Hopeless: The Success of the early Christianity and Hope for the Tongan Church* elaborated more on the importance of having a sense of belonging to the community as well as to the church. He explains that “Christiancommunity did not merely focus on serving the needs of the local, but they served it in way that many people felt they belonged to it.”⁶ That sense of belonging is the same as that of belonging to a family. For instance, I have a family consisting of my wife, children, in-laws and grandchildren, and my extended family. I belong to each of them, as much as I belong to God and that God belongs to me. I am a member of his body called the church and I feel good knowing that I belong. This is the same that should apply to youths in church, they must have a sense that they belong in the church, if they don't, our churches will continue to have empty pews with only a small number of youths attending.

Kristen Neff in her book, *Self-Compassion* indicates that compassion calls forth the “recognition of the common human experience” since “Compassion literally means ‘to suffer

⁶Sione T. T. Tu'ipulotu, *Gospel of Hope for the World of Hopeless: The Success of the early Christianity and Hope for the Tongan Church* (DMin Project, Claremont School of Theology, 2013), 56.

with', which applies a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering.”⁷ Tongan UMC leaders and the congregants should be able to have love and compassion towards one another and for the young adults too. To be able to find some resolutions on the problem of absence of youths from churches, members need the compassion and the co-operation of one another, which may mean that elders of the church must have compassion to hear the voices of their young people and vice versa. It is important to note that as a community builds upon Christ as a foundation, we are all together in this problem.

Su Yon Pak, Unzu Lee, Jung Ha Kim and MyungJi Cho in their book, *Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith* talked about the Korean community in the USA. They noted that “When Korean Americans come together to share rice, they are both reenacting and sharing cultural memories and creating their own ethnic identities anew in the United States.”⁸ The author emphasizes the importance of communal getting together of the body of Christ and providing hospitality to others. Tongans love to eat together just as Koreans do, so it's also important to use opportunities like these to have fellowship together, and act out of kindness to others including young groups (18-40 years old). Coming together as a form of sharing happens when ethnic groups come together for sports, cultural activities, church, and life events such as marriages, births and deaths. In many of these opportunities for sharing, it is important to note that anecdotally more young people attended these events than they do in churches. So, why is that the case?

iv. *Scope and Limitations of the Project*

⁷ Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher, 2011), 61-62.

⁸ Su Yon Pak, Unzu Lee, Jung Ha Kim, and MyungJi Cho, *Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2005), 90.

This project aims to address the issue of absence of young people in many churches. The findings are expected to help, not only the First Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona Valley, Pomona, California, but also, all UMC clergy and other Tongan American UMC's in the United States. This project is based on youths of the FTUMC in Pomona Valley, therefore the findings are specific to this congregation though some could be applied and be useful to all other Tongan American UMC's abroad.

The purpose of this project overall is to learn from the Tongan-American youths of what they consider the issues which prevent them from attending church and other church related activities. Dr. K. Samuel Lee lectured us on class about how important of the empathic skill and understanding.”⁹The project assumes an open approach to listening and understanding both the perspectives of the church leaders and the youths so that they come together to listen to each other and find ways of redressing the existing problem.

This project is also significant for the UMC Conferences to understand the cultural value of the Tongan churches to the overall UMC ministry, in relation to the youth ministry.

It is my desire that this research project will benefit the local Tongan churches and other churches that may want to use the findings to further improve their ministry in the future. Though the scope of the study is relatively narrow and limited in that it only targets one group of youths, the problem is significant for most Tongan churches across the United States.

I am aware of a number of limitations within this study. First of all, there is scarcity of Tongan literature on the subject, so I will draw from concepts and approaches from other non-

⁹K. Samuel Lee, “Empathic Skill Exercise: Showing Understanding”(lecture, Spiritual Care for Death, Dying and Bereavement, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, September 27, 2016).

Tongan specific literature, but especially so from similar ethnic minority studies which have been undertaken in this area. I'm sure there may be other questions that arise out of the discussions, but the most pertinent ones to address are to do with finding ways to increase or address the issues to do with youth's absences in churches.

v. *Procedure for Integration*

The results that come out of this research will provide opportunities for more productive dialogue between churches' clergy and youth so each may adjust to the new ways proposed in the project. Change is always hard, but new opportunities come with change as well. So adjusting to these in the church may take time, but at least there is some way forward to addressing the problems of youth attendance in church.

I would like at this point in time to bring in S Yon Pak explanations about adjusting to change. She says that "The practice of community formation requires members to tease out what is the 'normative' and 'acceptable' core of what a community believes."¹⁰ Having come to some decision to change, let's just say that if one does not care and/or does not want to take action, then we will all continue to struggle with this problem - this research might just as well be directed to close the church, since youths presence and taking part in church activities are vital to the continuity and survival of the church.

It will also make way for members of the Conference such as Bishops, District Superintendents, clergy and church leaders, to see and learn from what has happened within the Tongan American UMC's and use the findings as an example for workshops, lectures, sharing

¹⁰Pak, *Singing the Lord's Song*, 69.

and dialoguing about these problems that are present within the UMC not only in the Tongan congregations but other non-Tongan UMC's. I think that the important thing is to be able to communicate with each other for the common good of God's ministry within the community.

vi. *Chapter Outlines*

Chapter 1. **Introduction:** Chapter One presents the statement of the problem, the procedure for integration as well as the scope and limitations of this project. It also presents the content and chapters of this project and the intention of each chapter.

Chapter 2. **Methodology:**

This chapter explains the methods being used in the project to collect and analyze data.

Chapter 3. **Spiritual care among Tongan American churches:**

This chapter presents the spiritual care among Tongan American Churches from two perspectives: (i) theological and (ii) biblical.

Chapter 4. **Tongan Culture and Generations.**

Chapter Four outlines the important aspects of the Tongan cultural and spiritual care provided for across generations.

Chapter 5. **Results of the Project.**

Chapter Five describes the findings and examines the data gathered during the project.

Chapter 6. **Conclusion and Recommendations.**

Chapter Six explains the importance of the results in relation to spiritual care among Tongan American youth. It also provides recommendations for clergy and congregations.

II. METHODOLOGY and IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

i. Introduction

The First Tongan UMC of Pomona Valley was chosen as the site of the project, with its youths in the age group 18-40 as the target group. As stated earlier, I was surprised to see the absence of youth in worship attendance. This problem presents some challenges not only for me, but also for the clergy and church leaders in terms of what can be done to improve youths' attendance and involvement in the life of the church.

A survey instrument was designed to collect data from the target group in the form of a questionnaire. The set of eight questions was aimed at finding out the reasons and explanations as to the absence of youths in the church services and other activities. This research is solely based only in the analysis of the set questions in this questionnaire; the findings of which will be presented in the Results chapter.

The project meets the Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards. The research carries minimal risk to the participants. Personal information or names of participant are confidential, only the facts and information collected will be presented. Finally, this project reflects the normal activities of a church pastor in conversing with members of the congregation.

ii. Implementing the Project

A request for permission to conduct the research and interviews of the target group was sent to the Pastor of the FTPUMC. I also approached the parents of the young adults during

the Sunday services and other church activities to inform them of the research and to let them know ahead of time that I would be coming to their homes to collect data.

It was a challenge to set up a common time with some of the participants as they were working, undertaking some training or doing something else. They all worked different shifts at different times of the day. Due to the difficulty of finding a time to meet, some participants completed the questionnaire online.

At the onset of the meeting, the participants were informed of the purpose and their right to withdraw from the project anytime if they felt awkward or uncomfortable.

iii. The survey tool or questionnaire

The format was as follows:

Please state your name: _____

Please answer these questions honestly and truthfully and to the best of your ability.

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) How would you describe your church attendance (regular, sometimes, and hardly ever?)
- 3) What do you like about your Tongan Church?
- 4) What do you dislike about your Tongan Church?
- 5) What do you consider to be your spiritual needs? [For example, worship, prayer, counseling, fellowship, or community service]
- 6) What do you consider to be your gifts?

- 7) What can your church do to enrich your spiritual life?
- 8) What can you do to enrich the life of the church?

iv. Data Collection

After I was given permission to talk to these young adults I started interviewing them in churches and outside the church environment so basically anywhere that was convenient for them. But most of the data collection happened in the participants' homes. I was present in case they needed to clarify any questions and asked if they wanted to talk about anything relating to the project or anything else. When the forms were completed, the data analysis was then begun.

The data collection period ranges from November 2-20, 2018 with 30 Tongan American young adults of Pomona Valley completing the questionnaire.

v. Respecting Confidentiality and Disposing of all Questionnaires

All data and information regarding this project will be destroyed after the write-up of the project. Personal details and names of participants will not be used to identify them.

The final project will be read by the Faculty at Claremont School of Theology, and will also be available in the school's library. The pastor of the FTPVUMC will be given a summary of the research project especially the findings and the recommendations. The pastor can then share the information with his congregation to implement ways of improving youths' attendance within his church.

vi. Difficulties Encountered in Implementing this Project

The major difficulty encountered during this project was the extensive waiting period to obtain permission from the IRB at CST. I was not able to conduct my interviews until the IRB had given me permission to go ahead and start the project. After I was given the approval, I realized that I did not have enough time to do my field practical assignment.

The other problem I found was the availability of young adults who work at different times and in different places, so it was difficult to find a common time to undertake the interviews. I noticed also that it was taking a long time to encourage young people to participate in the project for their own reasons.

III. THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

i. Theoretical Perspective

A number of various theological concepts and stories from the bible and other resources will be used as approaches to contextualize, frame and strengthen the project.

a. Fiefia Theology

Fiefia is a Tongan word which means being happy or satisfied. Tradition tells of the Tongans using kafa or maea (rope) woven from coconut husk and other materials. The process of weaving takes time to learn how to weave three different strands together in order to make a rope, three strands coming as one. A teacher who is probably someone who knows the techniques and methods of weaving will first teach you how to start the process. The term "fie" is used to indicate the beginning of the process. After some time, the teacher will then come around to check on your progress. If you have learnt fast and have mastered how to weave the rope, then the teacher will use the term "fia" which means to go ahead and finish the job because you now know how to do it. In other words, the learner is “fiefia”, happy and contented that he or she has mastered the art of weaving or bringing three strands into one. Similarly, Bishop expands on the idea of three in one in his book *The Orthodox Way* stating that “The Christian God is not just a unit but a union, not just unity but community. There is in God something analogous to ‘Society.’”¹¹

¹¹ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 27.

The Tongans use this rope for different purposes and functions because it is durable and lasts for a very long time. Tongan people understand how important young people are for the life of our churches. This concept of the art of rope weaving is what the Tongan leaders and congregants have come up with to help these young adults start learning; “fie,” until they know and understand the whole process so that they may move onto continuing and completing the process; “fia.” This is the meaning of the Tongan word “fiefia”, a core value of this Tongan UMC youth project.

b. Salmon Theology

Salmon is a fish that usually travels up stream to find a suitable pond and/or place of safety where they are able to lay their eggs and then afterwards pass away. This was considered a sacred place for their journey. When the male salmon comes to fertilize these eggs, they then also die. The little salmon develop and stay in this pond until they mature enough to travel back from the pond to the ocean. They then travel all over the ocean until it is time for them to lay their eggs too. These salmon would then travel up the stream to the same pond where they were born, lay eggs and then die. It is a very difficult task to go against the current of the river but salmon were created to overcome this hard task. They not only have to battle the hard upstream current but also their predators which may wait to eat them up along the way. If a salmon gets to their safe place to lay or fertilize eggs, they have been able to successfully complete a difficult journey. No wonder God created them that way. After a long hard journey to reproduce, they die, life is complete, but they have restarted the creation cycle for the next generation.

This life cycle of nature is the same concept that I am trying to put in place so that we can activate things that can be done to improve conditions for Tongan young adults today. I care about the future of our Tongan American UMC churches ministry. This is going to be a difficult

journey as it will take time and space, but difficult as it may be, finding out the issues and concerns of youths is one step nearer to finding resolutions. As in the Salmon theology, when it is time for me to move/pass on, I wish for an ignited hope amongst the future young adults encouraging them to learn and step up in leading the family and the Tongan American churches so that the life cycle can begin once again.

c. Kava Circle

This is one-way that the Tongan people can get together not only to drink kava but to also have fellowship with others. After a long and hard day's work or similar circumstances, Tongan men and sometimes women get together at the end of their tasks to drink kava and share the experiences of their day. Kava is a plant that grows throughout in the Pacific Islands.

Tongans grow this plant and when it matures, they are harvested. The roots and stems of the plant are cleaned and dried under the sun for a period of time for storage. When moisture is completely taken out of the remains, they are then ground to produce fine powder. The powdered form of kava is then mixed with water and ready for drinking.

Drinking kava is something the Pacific Islanders have been doing for centuries now and many Tongans, including myself, still practice this tradition overseas. Kava is a part of our Tongan culture and tradition. Scientists have recently found that kava helps in the treatment of anxiety and other human diseases. It is not the kava drinking that I want to talk about but the opportunity to have fellowship with others that we do not usually see, meet, talk to and get to know. During the kava circle/drinking we tend to learn what each other's concerns and needs are. It also draws us closer together, creating a bond like that of brothers and sisters. Tongans feel loved and close to one another when participating in the kava circle and fellowship. Further, in a

kava circle, everyone is equal and everyone faces each member of the circle when they tell their story.

This type of fellowship will be good in drawing our Tongan youth together. They can share and talk about their concerns or something that they value in life not only physically and emotionally but also spiritually. This was also a good time to listen well to others. The theological view is that we are able to talk and have fellowship during the kava circles. Kava circles can be used as a way to minister to the youths at our Tongan American UMC churches. It encourages the young adults to socialize and meet Tongan youths from other churches.

d. Cultivation

This is the process of learning by passing down knowledge and information from the older generation to the younger generation. Tongans are connected and known to cultivate compassion for one another. In his book *Practicing Compassion*, Frank Rogers suggests that “We are wired for connection. We are born to love and to be loved. In truth, our deepest core is naturally compassionate . . . Jews and Christians hold that each person is created in the image of God, a God of infinite and extravagant compassion.”¹² There is a saying in the Islands that goes, “The reef of today is the island of tomorrow”, meaning that we (the parents or older folks of today) have to take good care and diligently look after our young adults and children in all areas of life; physically, emotionally and spiritually because they are going to be our replacements in the families, churches and communities in the future. They are going to continue our tasks and work into the future. The reef of today will become an island of tomorrow. The reef will live and grow underneath the ocean till it forms an island, which emerges above the surface of the ocean.

¹² Frank Rogers Jr, *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville, TN: Fresh Air Books, 2015), 60.

The idea is to teach our young adults all the good ways now because some day the old folks will pass on. This is done in good spirit believing that the young adults will learn and understand all the fundamental ways of life and continue their lives into the future. It is the same principle that the church as a whole would like to endorse among our young adults for the sake of the future of the Tongan American church.

e. Coconut Theology

The idea behind this concept is that we should use whatever we have in our natural environment to fulfill our daily needs to survive. A coconut tree is a picture of life for anybody in the South Pacific Ocean. Wherever they grow, life is abundantly ever present. The coconut tree is very valuable not only to Tongans but also to other Pacific Islanders. Every part of it, from its roots to its trunk, to its leaves and fruits are useful to the life of the people of Tonga.

Tonga consists of more than 150 little islands. Tonga's islands stretch across hundreds and hundreds of miles in the South Pacific Ocean. Tonga is divided into different island groups, with the main island called Tongatapu, the Ha'apai group, the Vava'u group, the two Niuas and the 'Eua Island. Transportation between islands is either by airplane or boat. Sometimes when the weather was bad and awful, communication can be cut or travel is made impossible. Sometimes communication between islands is problematic and it may continue for weeks or even longer, especially during the hurricane season. Residents especially in the outer islands would run out of daily supplies. The coconuts provide food for hard times such as these; the kernels (white flesh) are eaten as food, and juice for drinks. It has been known in many churches in Tonga that the kernel of the coconut and its juice has been used for Holy Communion because that was what they have at hand to use. That is everyone is using whatever is available to survive till help arrives in forms of restoring transportation and communication between islands.

During these difficult times, people would use different parts of the coconut tree for their daily needs. The roots would be used for fishing, the trunk to build their houses, the leaves to weave a roof for their houses and baskets, its delicious fruit for nourishment and cooking and use its coconut branches for fire and other needs. Every part of this tree is used for something, and nothing is thrown away. Even when there was no transportation and it took weeks and months for the supplies to reach these islands, the residents would use what they have to survive.

Tongans are often dubbed ‘coconuts’ by others, in the same way that Hawaiians are called pineapples. This is a derogatory usage of the term, meaning that you are brown on the outside and white inside just like a coconut. Here in the USA, we encourage the positive interpretations of the coconut as a way to preserve our culture and traditions and hold on to our faith. These are the few things that we value most in our Tongan family and we use this togetherness for survival. We want our children and grandchildren to grow up someday and use what they have been taught to survive here in this new land that we now call home. We want to value our young adults and teach them the ways of how we survived back in the islands. We want to tell them things that are important and good to keep and also things that they don’t need and to stay away from. These Tongan young adults need to know that as far as growing up in this new culture is concerned, every bit of information is important to survive. And participating as a member of the Tongan church is a priority.

ii. Bible Perspective It is important to also explore several Biblical perspectives in relation to the problem being addressed here in four major themes namely: oneness and happiness, compassion and joy, love one another, and finally inclusiveness and unity.

a. Oneness and Happiness

“Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” So He told them this parable, saying, “What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”¹³

I am thinking here of the happiness and oneness of the body of Christ which is the church and Jesus is the head in relation to the lost sheep that was found and brought home. Jesus told this story (parable) about someone who had one hundred sheep. He noticed one day that he had one sheep missing. He left the ninety-nine sheep to go and look for this lost sheep. When he found the lost sheep, he put him on his shoulder and brought him home. Christians always celebrate and are joyous to reunite with a lost member who returns to the family of God.

I empathize with the owner of the sheep. He noticed that he was missing one and because that one sheep is valuable and was very important to him he made every effort to find that one. When he brought him back to join the others, he invited his friends and neighbors to join him in celebrating his return. It is important to note that the shepherd did not leave the ninety-nine sheep because he disliked them but it was because he loved the one lost sheep. He wanted to search for the lost sheep because he valued every one of his sheep and thought of each one as precious. He wanted all of the hundred sheep, not just some of them. Sister Greta Ronningen talks about this parable in her book *Free On The Inside: Finding God Behind Bars*. She writes, “Jesus came for

¹³Luke 15:1-7, NASB.

the lost, for those who feel unworthy. He came to heal and to restore his flock. The concept being developed in the book is ‘lost’ and the importance of this. Many similar stories are outlined in the New Testament about the importance of the lost!”¹⁴ The same ideology should be adopted among church leaders and congregants, when looking for the “lost” Tongan young adults whose absence from church services and activities is visible. Bringing them back to the fold and the community of faith of Christians can be likened to Christ as the shepherd looking for the lost sheep. Church leaders need to find out the reasons and issues that some youth do not attend and become involved in church and church activities. They need to be brought together in oneness with the other members of the faith community.

b. Compassion and Joy

“And He said, ‘A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving *anything* to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and

¹⁴ Sister Greta Ronningen, *Free On The Inside: Finding God Behind Bars* (Los Angeles, CA: Cathedral Center Press, 2016), 18.

began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and *yet* you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was lost and has been found.*’”¹⁵

This is a very familiar Bible story of the prodigal son. Jesus told this parable of the two sons. The younger asked for his share of the estate and took off from home while the elder stayed home with the father. The younger son went to a faraway place and squandered all his money. A famine occurred and he was homeless. He went and worked in a pig farm and even had to eat the same food as the pigs. Then one day he came to his senses and remembered his father’s home where he once belonged. He remembered the good memories of having plenty and supplies in abundance of everything he wanted in his father’s house. The young prodigal’s son decided to return home.

As the father watched from afar and saw his son coming home he felt compassion for him, he ran to meet him, embraced and kissed him. Marcus J Borg argues in his book *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teaching, and Relevance of a Religious Revolution* that “...for good reason, scholars have suggested titles for the story that emphasize the father, for the focus is as much on him as on the prodigal: ‘the father and his two sons,’ ‘the waiting father,’ ‘the loving father,’ the compassionate father.”¹⁶ The story continues with the father asking his servants to attend to all of

¹⁵Luke 15:11-32, NASB.

¹⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teaching, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 169.

his son's needs and wants. He also would like to kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast so that they could eat and celebrate that the son of his who was dead but had now come back to life, was lost but has now been found and so they began to celebrate.

Based on these two parables, I think that as a Christian pastor, I am presented with the problem of looking for and returning the lost Tongan youths to a place they should be calling home. Given the contexts of many Tongan youths in the USA, there are competing demands on the time of the youths. They work and study, and most have busy schedules. It would be hard to get them all in one place at the same time. But the owner as in the above parable was determined to keep on hoping that the son would one day return home. It is my hope that one day I may be able to help bring them home, a home where union, togetherness and oneness with others is ever present.

Let me look at the compassion that the father had for his prodigal son. The father felt the compassion and love that his son was coming home despite what had happened. Chuck Smith in his commentary shares that “Our God does not say to the foolish, ‘You idiot,’ to the one who is abused, ‘Grow up,’ or to the rebellious, ‘You’re getting what you deserve.’ No, quite the opposite; the father runs to meet all three equally the moment they turn towards Him. That’s the kind of God we serve.”¹⁷ The father was happy because the son that he had lost had come home. Likewise, church leaders and congregation should have compassion and joy for Tongan young adults that hardly ever come to church services and activities; they are coming back, so we need to make them feel at home in the church.

¹⁷ Chuck Smith, *Jon Courson’s Application Commentary New Testament, Volume 3: Matthew-Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2003), 375.

c. Love One Another

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”¹⁸

In the above passage, Jesus knew that he did not have much time left with his disciples on earth. He would be arrested, tried, crucified, buried, resurrected and ascended. The disciples would have to live without him. Jesus gave them a new commandment that they had to love one another just as he loved them. Even though the Old and New Testaments have talked about loving God, loving one another and loving others, this new commandment that Jesus talks about was different. He demonstrates love by paying the price of dying on the cross. He shows his love even to the point of death, and never gives up or changes his position. The important point is that we need to continue to love one another like he did for them and us, by doing so; other people would remember that they were his disciples. In other words, by demonstrating love, we also demonstrate the core value of being a disciple of Christ, and that is love.

Even though Jesus spoke of his new commandment to the disciples, the message still applies to our ministry today. Christians do need to love one another no matter what, when, who or how. Church leaders and believers need to demonstrate that loving others extend to including our Tongan young adults who are absent from church.

¹⁸John 13:34-35, NASB.

Sometimes it may be that the young adult population feels neglected and left out by the church. Or perhaps the church sometimes ignores the needs and wishes of the young generation. If the Tongan people want the ministries of Tongan American churches to continue, we as the church leaders and the rest of congregants have to reach out and demonstrate to the youth the love that Jesus has commanded of us. Tamar Frankiel in her book *The Gift of Kabbalah: Discovering the Secrets of Heaven, Renewing Your life on Earth* illuminates that “On the human level, the Torah’s essential message is loving-kindness. In many Jewish prayers and in Islam as well, God is called ‘the compassionate One.’ Similarly, in the Christian’s faith, the expansiveness of the Divine love has been a part of its theology since the beginning . . .”¹⁹ Loving one another was considered the focal point of this passage. Christians need to love one another as Jesus has done for us.

d. Inclusiveness and Unity

“For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.”²⁰

Paul was teaching the people at the church of Corinth about the importance of inclusiveness and unity of the body of Christ that is the church. Paul rebuked the thoughts of division that some members of the church of Corinthians had. He used the analogy of the body being constructed of many different parts to illustrate how the church is Christ’s body. Each part has a different task and function. Even though they are all different, they belong to one body. When one member is affected, the other members feel it - the whole body is affected. This is like

¹⁹ Tamar Frankiel, *The Gift of Kabbalah: Discovering the Secrets of Heaven, Renewing Your Life on Earth* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lighting Publishing, 2004), 56.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:12, NASB.

the Christ's church. Even though we are many people who all have different callings and talents, we belong to this one body called the church and at the head is Jesus Christ. The body needs a heart and the heart needs a body. They belong together and to one another.

It may be assumed here that the Tongan American young adults feel that they are ignored and overlooked. Because they have been raised within the Tongan culture where questioning authority was considered disrespectful, they probably have kept to themselves and did not dare question people in authority like teachers, pastors and ministers, nor do they even talk about their concerns to others. In the Tongan culture, young adults are taught to follow what they were told without speaking back. The idea of questioning authority by their children is a new concept to most Tongan parents; hence there is no space for young adults to question culture, decisions, beliefs and faith. This creates a conflict between them and the older generations because they misunderstand one another. The Tongan American young adults are raised up in a different culture where asking questions and responding to anyone is the way of this culture. This is one example of culture playing a critical role in the life of the Tongan American young adult in America.

Despite generational differences, the point is that young adults still belong to one body and its head is Jesus Christ. They all include and are united into one body which is the church and its head is Christ. For that thought, it is very important to be inclusive of young people in order to start building togetherness and unity in the church community.

IV. THE TONGAN CULTURE AND YOUNG ADULTS

I. 1st Generation Tongans

The first-generation Tongans are those who were born and raised in the islands; they grew up and spent most of their lives there. Some first-generation Tongans migrated to the United States as adults and still hold the values and core traditions of the Tongan culture. They get involved in running the churches, more or less the same traditional and conservative ways that they are used to in the islands. Their views of the church vary from that of their children or the second generation. These differing views may be the cause of conflict between generations. For example, during the worship time at Tongan American church services, the first generation would prefer to sing the traditional hymns but the second generation wants to sing contemporary music. For this reason or another, most of the second-generation young adults may prefer to stay home or go to another church that appeals or caters for their spiritual needs. It could be said that perhaps second-generation youth do not want to attend or worship in a context that they do not identify with or understand.

In addition, most of the Tongan American church services are conducted mostly in the native language and following the traditional program structure of the service. The population of the first generation can be conservative and they want to do things in the way that they are used to and have grown up knowing. They do not understand the new language as much as the second generation. They have some ideas of the American culture but they may prefer to do things in the old tradition and custom. Anecdotally, this is one of the many factors that have caused the

problems between the first and second generations. The first generation wants to stick to the old ways while the second generation would prefer the new ways that the new culture presents.

From my experiences of the Tongan American churches in the United States, most have conducted their services using the old ways, those that are still used in the islands. I believe that all generations are important to God and his body that is the church. There is therefore a need to work and support all members of the church to find solutions to preserve the culture and at the same time adapt to the new ways for the sake of young adults.

II. 1.5 Generation Tongans

The 1.5-generation is made up of those who came to the USA as children or adolescents. I was born in Tonga and came to the United States when I was a teenager and so I consider myself as a member of the 1.5-generation, though this may not be the view of others in this group.

I grew up in the tradition and ways of the Tongan people. I came to understand what the Tongan culture meant and its value to my life. I migrated to the United States in the 1980's and have lived here ever since. This means that I have lived in the States longer than I have lived in Tonga. I have adapted to the ways of my new culture that I now call home. I am familiar with the old and the new cultures. Sometimes I feel as if I have been squeezed between the first and second generations. Being part of the 1.5-generation has helped me understand what I could keep or preserve from my Tongan culture and what to let go, and what to keep from my new culture that I learn in the United States. But to many second generation young people, it would seem that they are confused about the expectations of them by the first generation who mainly run the Tongan church in the United States.

Let me clarify this by using examples of what happens during church services and its activities. As a practicing pastor, I understand both Tongan and English, and can deliver services comfortably in both languages. However, for the first generation, English is a language they know very little of, and they would feel alienated if they attend an all English service. The same goes to the second-generation group, a service delivered in Tongan doesn't draw much attention for them to attend church; hence their absence from the Tongan churches.

It appears then that people of the 1.5 generation tend to be the bridge because they understand the perceptions of the other two generations. A member of the 1.5-generation can experience both sides and therefore has more knowledge of their circumstances. The advantage of being a 1.5-generation would be to minister to both the first and second generations. I came to understand what and how to connect both sides.

III. 2nd Generation Tongans

The second generation consists of those Tongans who were born in the USA and have no direct history, memory or connection to Tonga. Members of the second generation know only of one home, the land of their birth, the United States. They grew up in their home and (in most cases) have never been to their parents' islands, let alone had any contact with the old Tongan traditions, customs and culture. They have very little knowledge or hardly have any understanding of the old traditions and values. Naturally for them, the US culture is their culture that they have grown up knowing their whole lives.

When it comes to having combine Tongan church worship services and activities, the second generation would prefer to do things their way, the way that they have come to

understand God and their relationship with God. The first generation on the other hand will always favor their old traditional way of worship because that was what they grew up to understand. This sometimes creates miscommunication between the two groups and leads to some problems; in this case, the absence of youths from church is a telling point. The second generation feels that their voices have been ignored and overlooked by church leaders in favor of the wishes of the first generation members.

I am a member of the 1.5-generation, and I regard this issue of miscommunication between generations as an opportunity for me to work with both parties to find solutions that will be able to bridge the gap and to connect the old and the young. The two generations are both members of the Tongan American church. It is at this time that a church leader will come along to provide spiritual care that is suitable and relevant for both generations.

IV. Cultural Differences

For a Tongan, generally speaking, their culture means family and family means everything. Eric H. F. Law in his book *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* shares “When I use the word *culture* in this context, I refer to ethnic culture—the values, beliefs, arts, food, custom, clothing, family and social organization, and government of a given people in a given time.”²¹ We may all agree that if two generations come together, conflicts may arise, one way or another. Similarly, Edwin D. Aponte explains in his book *Santo: Varieties Of Latino / A Spirituality* that “While cultures and cultural

²¹ Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in Multicultural Community* (ST Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 1993), 4.

practices mix and create something new, sadly it is too easy to put the resulting new mix in a box that can be easily be put aside on a shelf and we deal with it when and if we want to.”²² They both have their own ways and it can become very hard to settle conflicts they have with each other. Even a 1.5-generation member such as myself, I would have a hard time coping with the two groups due to the cultural differences that exist between generations.

However, despite their differences, church leaders, 1st, 1.5 and 2nd generations should be able to sit down together and work out solutions in order to maintain unity and togetherness and the continuing ministry of the Tongan churches for the future. For example, the Tongan American churches have adopted a traditional way of offering called *misinale* or tithe, and use it as a practice in the Tongan American churches. In Tonga, the Sunday offerings of money for the year are very small as compared to each family’s annual giving or donation to church in the *misinale*. When the *misinale* comes around they give all they had to offer and have saved, so the total budget for the church could be collected on that one day of offering. The first generation would value this day as their day of giving as they could demonstrate to the church their commitment to the life of the church. Usually the more one gives (yes the amount is made public too); the more dedicated one is to the church.

On the other hand, the second generation does not understand the concept of *misinale*. This may be one of the reasons why they stay away from church. It would be interesting to track whether such an elaborate way of giving will continue as a practice in the future when the second-generation young people become church leaders themselves.

²² Edwin D. Aponte, *Santos: Varieties Of Latino/A Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 143.

One of the presumptions about young people's absences from church is the lack of understanding between generations. As stated earlier, compassion and love are required to bring the two generations together in one, in joy and happiness, as expressed in the central Christian message, loving one another as Jesus has demonstrated on the cross. This is a timely project and a vital time for church leaders to use the opportunity to provide spiritual care and comfort for members of the two different generations. Wayne E. Oates describes in his book *Your Particular Grief* that "In brief, God saves us from self-centeredness and 'pity me' way of life by intensifying our awareness of our capacity to comfort other people in their suffering."²³ In this project, it would seem that each generation has their different needs and wants; we need prayers, meditations and visitations for the two separate groups to bring them together in hope and trust that compromises would be made. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Douglas J. Schuurman emphasize the importance of prayer in their book *Calling in Today's World: Voices from Eight Faith Perspectives* saying that "Prayer and meditation help spark and sustain a sense of calling."²⁴

In my own practice as a pastor, I carried out my pastoral care duty by visiting members of my church, pray, reflect and share with them, attempting to come to some understanding of the issues and problems facing both groups. I feel that more time and space should be dedicated to discussions between generations in a safe environment as they deal with the issues at hand.

²³Wayne E. Oates, *Your Particular Grief* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1981), 115.

²⁴ Kathleen A. Cahalan and Douglas J. Schuurman, *Calling in Today's World: Voices from Eight Faith Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 70.

V. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In presenting the results, I will limit my discussions to the top three most common answers from the survey questions, unless there is a need to talk about results which may rank lower but significant to mention. The result of each question will be listed starting from the most received response to the least of the top three.

I. The survey questions

- i. Your name and age please. (Note the target group's age range is 18-40).

There were 30 participants taking part in the project; twenty of whom were young men and ten young women, and all of them are current members of the first Tongan American UMC of Pomona Valley, Pomona, California. About 82% were in the age group of 18-30 and the remaining 18% between the ages of 30-40. About 80% of the participants were born and raised in the USA, the rest were born elsewhere.

- ii. Church Attendance (frequency in terms of: regular, sometimes and hardly ever)

The aim of this question is to ascertain a clear picture of the target group's attendance in church services and activities. Of the 30 participants, only 26% were regular attendees, 61% sometimes attend and 13% hardly ever attending church services and activities. Of the 'regular attendances', more young men attend than young female; 13% to 10%. Of the 'sometimes attend' group, 40% were young men as compared to 20% of young women. Of the 'hardly attend' group, 10 % were young men as compared to 3% of young women. The results clearly

indicated that ‘regular and sometimes’ category of attendances in church, it seems that more young men attend than female, the opposite is the case in the ‘hardly’ attend group.

iii. What do you do like about the Tongan church?

This question aims at finding out aspects of the church that may have attracted them to the Tongan American UMC services and activities. Outlined below are the top three responses grouped by theme.

1. Culture and Tradition

In this theme, 57% of the young adults said that they like the culture and tradition within the Tongan church services and activities.

2. Worship

There was only 23% of the youth said that they attend because they value the worship services.

3. Family togetherness

Of all the participants, 20% said that they like seeing the family coming together to attend church.

It is surprising to see that more than half of the target group value culture and traditions more than anything else in the Tongan churches. The results may indicate that even though the second generation does not want to adopt all of the traditions of the first generation, they still feel strongly connected to their culture and heritage.

So it would seem that only a few young adults attend church to worship – to hear the Word of God during the Tongan church services and activities. Similarly, only a few young

adults attend to maintain family togetherness in church. Family is a very important part of life of a Tongan, so being together at church as a family remains to be highly valued by some.

iv. What do you dislike about the Tongan Church?

In the same vein as the previous question, the aim here is to highlight aspects of the Tongan church that are not appealing to young people. The responses from the participants include some of the following:

1. Lengthy services

There were 33% of the youths stating that the service either started late or took longer than the expected time of delivery.

2. High expectation of youths

About 20% stated that they felt that the church placed so much expectation on them, with high demands on their time.

3. Nothing

16% said that there was nothing really that they dislike about the Tongan church.

Lengthy services and having high expectations of youths by the church were the two major dislikes. Many of the Tongan American church services and activities are conducted in the Tongan traditional ways, where sometimes time is not considered in the same light as that of a western society like the USA. So whilst the lengthy services may not be an issue for them, it is clearly something that youths dislike. Further, the first generation is accustomed to lengthy sermons, so it can be said that the first generation may have more tolerance time-wise perhaps

than the second generation who wanted church services and activities to start on time and finish on time.

For all Tongan pastors, this could be something that can be rectified in consideration of the young adults' time, which may have to work on Sundays. Most often their reaction to lengthy sermons is to leave and play with their phones outside the church.

Placing a high expectation on youths was one of their dislikes of Tongan churches. For example, some churches even expected their young adults to financially contribute to the church, say in events like the *misinale*. For a second-generation youth, usually with very little knowledge and understanding of the significance of giving money to church, this is a turn-off. Realistically, the expectations should be moderated for young adults, during this time in their life, some would be just starting their professional career, some may already have a young family to raise, some are in college or just moving out of the parents' home to establish themselves independently. It's a time that most changes happen in their personal lives; emotionally, physically and spiritually.

- v. What do you consider to be your spiritual needs? (For example: worship, prayers, counseling, fellowship or community service).

The question aims at identifying distinct spiritual needs of young people. The results are as follows:

1. Prayer

An overwhelming number of young people - 66% considered prayer as their main spiritual need.

2. Worship and Fellowship

Both of these needs were a tie with 43% of young adults identifying worship and fellowship as their needs for spiritual care.

3. Community service

About 26% identified community service as their area of spiritual need.

Praying was considered a very significant spiritual need by young people. This is a common need of all members in many churches, family circles, and communities, the need for prayers and praying as a Christian practice is a common basic need, and young adults are no exception.

Worship and fellowship follow in second place. It could be said that this would be an opportune time for both generations to come together in worship and fellowship. Understanding one another's issue/s could be the common ground to form a basis of union in faith and sharing between generations.

Providing community service was the lowest ranked spiritual need. Perhaps this could be further developed as there are an increasing number of young people worldwide who opt to provide community service. For example, helping as volunteers in an age care facility, doing shopping for the aged, firefighting, and helping to feed the needy, and so forth. In my experiences, after completing community service, I would come home full of joy and happiness and gave thanks to the God Almighty of the opportunity to serve and provide hospitality to others in his name. Timothy Beal in his book *Religion In America: A Very Short Introduction* touches the idea that "Hospitality is about letting the other into one's home, one's family, one's

heart and mind. It is about being open to a relationship with others.”²⁵ Community services appeal to the hospitality nature of both parties, the provider and the receiver of the service.

vi. What do you consider to be your gifts?

The purpose of this question was to allow the participants to think deeply about their gifts or talents or abilities that they have. The three top responses were:

1. Helping others

50% of the young adults see themselves as helpers.

2. Singing in the choir

33% said that singing was their gift or talent they would like to develop and use in church.

3. Loving one another

Only 16% of the young adults said that their gift was loving others in and beyond the church.

We observe here that these young adults considered that their greatest gift is helping others. I believe that there is an avenue to develop these young adults’ abilities to further their role in helping others. I used to take a little group of people to help out in mission in various places. It needs to be developed by the church leaders and congregants.

Singing is one talent that Tongans are known for. In every UMC Conference and other church activities, Tongan choirs are invited to sing. Church leaders and other non-Tongans are often surprised and indeed impressed with Tongan singers and singing. The Tongans normally

²⁵ Timothy Beal, *Religion In America: A Very Short Introduction* (NY, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

would not use any musical instruments to be able to sing a hymn; instead they would just sing *acappella* style. Tongans love to sing especially at church and in their activities and other social functions outside of the church context.

The young adults' talent in singing could be supported and further developed by the church, as they could sing individually, or in small groups or in a band, and can join the main church choir as well. They could be allowed to be creative in composing religious songs and using these instead of the usual hymns in church services. This way they could feel that they are valued; they are a part of the church and thereby creating a sense of belonging to the church and its community. Diana Sanchez in the *Hymns of The UMC Hymnal* explains the importance of music to the church and the sense of being together as a collective. She states that "The responsibility of singing is on each of us and together we can continue the tradition of being 'a singing church'." ²⁶

Loving one another is an important command of our Lord Jesus Christ. We need to love God and our neighbors as we love ourselves, one of the first and foremost golden laws. Loving one another extends beyond church to communities that members of the church interact with on a daily basis; their work, family, hospital, in the public transport and other areas. Loving one another could find expression when the church leaders assign mentors from the first generation to youth of the second generation. They could work in groups and plan what they could achieve; they could visit a sick member of the church or they could plan a visit to young people in prison. By having this interaction outside of the church as mentor-mentee, it helps build stronger

²⁶ Diana Sanchez, *The Hymns of the United Methodist Church: Introduction to the Hymns, Canticles, and Acts of Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 19.

relationships and understanding between generations. Young people will no doubt have a sense of self-worth as they are putting in practice what loving one another means.

vii. What can your church do to enrich your spiritual life?

In order to understand more what the church can offer this generation of young adults, this question is very relevant. Their responses are as follows:

1. Provide young adult programs

It was no surprise to see that 43% wants the church provides young adult programs that are relevant and suitable for young adults.

2. Have an English service

Not all respondents suggested an English service, only 16%, contrary to popular beliefs that young adults couldn't understand the Tongan language services.

3. Church should do more than the norm

At the lower end, only 13% would like the church to do more to address the needs of the Tongan young adults.

The church may consider how to create and implement youth programs, but always in consultation with young adults. The church, for example, the church can participate in various programs offered by the CALPAC Annual Conference such as young adult camp, praise worship, praise band and many others for the age group of 18-40.

In my own experiences, young adults prefer some kind of spiritual programs for them to be implemented only at their local churches. The programs must be in English so that this group would be able to understand the whole service and activities. Further, the design of the program must be relevant to young adults, with the aim to meet their spiritual needs. The 1st generation

can be invited to the young adults' program, staying connected in English as well as in the Tongan language is important to both groups.

Finally, some participants stated that the church leaders needed to do more outreach work specifically for young adults. The young adults wanted to help feed the homeless in the community. They wanted to participate in mission trips organized by the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). They wanted to participate in other community activities such as cleaning the public places, and helping the old folks with their daily duty.

viii. What can you do to enrich the life of the church?

The last question of the project aims at gauging the participants' thoughts about their contribution to the life of the church. The responses include the following.

1. Participating in church and its activities

The results were surprising; 33% identified participation in the church services and activities as a priority to enrich the life of the church.

2. Attending church

Attending church was another surprise with 30% stating that this will enrich the life of the church.

3. Helping others in and beyond the church

Helping others was 20% and the least of the top three priorities. Young adults thought that helping others could enrich the life of the church.

I want to tell a story in relation to the first result of this question. A few years ago, I was attending a Presbyterian Church clergy workshop in Pueblo, Colorado. The lecturer presented us with some research statistics on the many reasons why many of the United Methodist Church

members left their church. One of the major reasons was that they were not being used by the church to take part in or participate in the church services and its activities. To me, I didn't feel then that this was a serious enough reason to leave church, normally there would be reasons more perplexing than mere participation. For example, I know of some folks who left their church because of a disagreement with the minister or having a long-term unresolved conflict with another family in the church. I was wrong, and it's interesting that the finding of this survey produces the same result as the data presented in my workshop. The young adults have identified that their participation would enrich the life of the church. They need to feel included not excluded in the church services and functions. Henri Nouwen in his book *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* elaborates more on the subject of participation and inclusion.

“The call to solidarity always moves us from exclusion to inclusion in order to embrace a greater mystery and a larger community. The movement from exclusive to inclusive community calls for radical hospitality, spiritual intimacy, and open Communion in the body of Christ.”²⁷

Let it be said then that feeling and having a sense of inclusion is possible; it calls for understanding of a change management process, one which may include moving young adults from the margins of the church to the core of the community. This will require a change which may take some time especially for the first generations who may argue that everyone in the church have to earn their place, including participation in church service and activities. However, if we listen to such argument, we will continue to alienate young people from church; thus defeating the purpose of being an inclusive church.

²⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 90.

The results show that young adults believe that their church attendance could enrich the life of the church. It should be noted here that the reasons for attending church were not asked of the participants, but it is clear that their reality perhaps may have prevented them from attending church. For whatever reasons they don't attend church regularly, this is outside of the scope of this project, but there's hope that when their commitments allow them to attend church they do so and value their attendance as enriching for the life of the church.

Helping others is also considered by the target group as a way of enriching the life of the church. Church leaders and people would sit together with young adult leaders and work out or plan some outreach program to implement for the community and others in needs. This is what these young adults would like to do to enrich the life of the church so why hold back but start some outreach programs to involve and well attended by these young people as they prefer to do it for the church and all.

VI. CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this research project have provided a window into the views of young adults of the First Tongan United Methodist Church of Pomona Valley and what the church could do to attract them as well as valuing their contributions to enrich the life of the church.

Obviously there is room and opportunity for good leadership. The church leaders and congregants should be able to sit down together and work something out for the good of all people of God, old and young at church. AzimKhamisa in his book *From Murder to Forgiveness* speaks highly about the importance of working together. “As I look at what we are doing together, and what we can accomplish together, I look inside myself, and find again the seeds of optimism and promise.”²⁸ As a practicing pastor, having compassion is so important to help in resolving problems and issues face by the young adults of the church, similarly church leaders and congregants should work together to explore collective resolutions for the good of the future of the Tongan churches in the United States.

²⁸AzimKhamisa, *From Murder to Forgiveness* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2012), 171.

A number of recommendations can be made from the findings of the study.

- 1) For the church leaders and congregants of FTPVUMC, a workshop on religious and educational practice and direction should be held immediately to bring understanding to the spiritual formation and practices of the young adults of the church.
- 2) There is an immediate need for spiritual care and leadership for the Tongan young adults of Pomona Valley. A spiritual camp could be planned as an opportunity for young people to further discuss their contributions to enrich the life of their church. I believe that this is one important journey for a young adult to signify a place and space called home, and the Pomona Tongan United Methodist could be the holy ground and space for the Tongan American young adults.

Spiritual formation is one of the very important elements of the Tongan American United Methodist Church practice. Various retreats are conducted throughout the year such as Easter retreat, alcohol/Drugs retreat, Bible Reading retreat and a youth retreat in December before the year ends.

The Resurrected Christ has risen to give us hope in the future. He is alive. It is this hope that challenges us to provide spiritual formation not only for Tongan youth but also for the rest of the congregation. Tongan American youth need this kind of spiritual practice to keep them connected to God.

Lastly, I want to share with you again what the theological idea behind this spiritual educational practice that I have shared earlier because it sums up the big picture here. It demonstrates the process of learning between the parent and their children. Viliami Tu'ivai in his

book *Life Champion: Life Lessons that Yield Championship Results* shares with us his experience “They taught me a multitude of lessons, but having faith was the greatest one, Through their living example, it became clear to me that the Lord will always make a way in difficult times.”²⁹ This process is described by the Tongan word “*Fiefia*.” Tongan people wrap their *kafa* (a long rope made from coconut husk woven together) to tie their *ta’ovala* (Tongan mat) around their waist. This is our traditional dress code. The parents teach their children how to weave the *kafa* at a young age. They would start by saying “fie” that means you practice first how to weave the *kafa*. It will take some time for this process before you take it all in. When you learn how to do the “fie” part then they will say again “fia” that means that you have learn how to do this so go ahead and do the rest on your own. You now put the two words together to come up with the one word *fiefia*. It is my wish and belief that this spiritual formation and the mystery working of God in the process will impact the life of these Tongan American youth and through their experience will teach others the same spiritual formation to have a relationship with the Resurrected One. One of the Tongan meanings of the word *fiefia* in English is happy. It is a happy moment when someone completes the process of weaving the *kafa* so as the same motive with this educational practice after the retreat to feel loved by God and others not only at church but everywhere outside of church too. It is the feeling of belief and faith that with God I can do it.

May God bless and give everyone who has a heart for this project comfort, peace and grace as Paul gave comfort in his letter to the Corinthians:

“We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Father Who shows us loving-kindness and our God Who gives us comfort. He gives us comfort in all our troubles. Then we can comfort other people who have the same troubles. We give the same kind of comfort God gives us.”³⁰

²⁹ViliamiTu’ivai, *Life Champion: Life Lessons That Yield Championship Results* (Lime Works Inc, 2015), 14.

³⁰2 Corinthians 1:3-4, NLV.

“Tau fakafeta’ikihe ‘Otua, kiheTamai ‘a hotau ‘EikikoSisuKalaisi. KoeTamaimohu ‘alo’ofaia, koe ‘Otua ‘oku ne tokoni’ima’uaipekitautilu. ‘Oku ne tokoni’ima’uaipekitautilu ‘ihengaahime’a ‘oku tau faingata’a ‘iaai, koe ‘uhike tau lava ai ‘o tokoni’i ha ni’ihikehe ‘aki ‘aefa’ahingatokonina’etokoni’i ‘akikitautilu” (1 Kolinito 1: 3-4, KoeTaulua).

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